

Article

The Genealogy of No-Self: Marguerite Yourcenar's Koan of the Labyrinth

Joyce Janca-Aji

Department of World Languages and Cultures, Coe College, 1220 First Ave N.E., Cedar Rapids, IA 52402, USA; jjanca@coe.edu

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Abstract: 20th-century French author, Marguerite Yourcenar, prefaces the first volume of her autobiographical/genealogical trilogy, *Dear Departed* with a 13th-century Zen koan: What is your original face before your parents were born? In the context of the meticulously researched family history of her maternal line, Yourcenar examines the foundations and major resources of individual and collective self-writing in light of Buddhist discourses on the nature of self, while offering an incisive critique of and alternative to the function of genealogical inquiry.

Keywords: autobiography; genealogy; self-writing; Buddhist; Yourcenar

As the first *immortelle* of the *Académie française*, Marguerite Yourcenar is considered a canonical twentieth-century French author, particularly known for prize-winning historical novels such as *Memoirs of Hadrian* and *The Abyss*. However, as much as she is revered as an erudite high modernist whose work reflects the literary and cultural richness of Greco-Roman Antiquity and the Western tradition, it is often overlooked that she had deep and abiding affinities with Buddhism. Her work, spanning nearly a sixty-year period from late 1920s to her death in 1987, occupies a particularly striking moment in the history of Buddhist encounters with the West. Yourcenar came of age as a writer just as the fascination with Alexandra David-Neel's descriptions of magic and mystery in Tibet swept through France. She emigrated to the U.S. shortly before postwar literary counterculture movements embraced Zen, and then closely followed the succeeding waves of Buddhist cultural and textual assimilation in the 1970s and 1980s. Unlike many writers of the same period, who either imitated Buddhist-inflected thought and stylistics or used them to critique Western modernity, Yourcenar's literary experiments with Buddhist texts and teachings functioned as a mode of contemplative inquiry set in the context of her particular intellectual and cultural idiom and lived experience.

In her later years, Yourcenar turned her attention from historical fiction to her own place in genealogical, literary, and spiritual lineages. The three volumes of *Le Labyrinthe du monde: Souvenirs pieux* (Yourcenar 1974), *Archives du Nord* (Yourcenar 1977), and *Quoi? L'éternité* (Yourcenar 1988) meticulously trace her maternal line, paternal line, and the life of her father respectively. She described these works not as a form of genealogy, or even autobiography (given that she appears only as a six-week-old infant), but as "souvenirs": something between an essay, a poem, and a novel (Yourcenar 2002, p. 116). This generic ambiguity is a deliberate stance. In affirming the literariness of her endeavor, Yourcenar dispenses with any notion of an autobiographical pact or attempt at "objective" historicity. Instead of following the models set forth by Augustine and centuries of tomes tracing the noble lines of great men, Yourcenar focuses on interrogating them. By prefacing her family trilogy with a version of a 13th-century koan from the *Mumonkan*: "What was your original face before your parents met?" she contests the traditional Western conception of self as a separate and essential entity, and by implication, the philosophical and metaphysical foundations on which individual and collective forms of self-writing rest.

Critics have duly noted the uniqueness of her approach. [Hélène Jaccopard \(1993\)](#) claims that “In reaching back over four million years, she is alone among other autobiographers in situating human time on a more cosmic scale” (translation mine). [Simone Proust \(1994\)](#) argues that Yourcenar’s strategies are not only close to, but are actually inspired by and proceed from a vision of the world that reflects that of Buddhism. [Proust \(1996\)](#) also finds that they seem to parallel elements of Noh theater. Jean Roudaut describes Yourcenar’s intention not as trying to affirm herself through literature, but to dissolve into it, with her memoirs taking on “the value of a spiritual exercise” ([Roudaut 1978](#), p. 77). Yourcenar supported this reading, describing Roudaut’s insight as a milestone in the criticism of her work ([Yourcenar 1995](#), pp. 779–80).

But how exactly does using an impossible question about an “original face” as the starting point of a genealogical memoir function as a spiritual exercise? While there is some irony in the fact that an unanswerable question on the nature of self beyond name and form is followed by three volumes of compiled names and forms, there is also some paradoxical wisdom. In some schools of Zen, koans are used as a form of spiritual inquiry designed to lead students away from discursive thought and attachment to concepts and ideas and toward an unknowingness that allows for deeper, nondual realization. As Yourcenar explains, the objective of koan practice is “to have the student meditate on a series of apparently absurd questions, absurd because they refuse to let themselves be reduced to a purely verbal logic, just as, moreover, life itself” ([Yourcenar 1995](#), p. 770, translation mine). The location of the koan at the onset of the text is a clear invitation for readers to drop all preconceived notions and to abandon critical, theoretical, or even conceptual paradigms and modes of thought. The choice of this particular koan invites readers to hold the question of what is an “original face” as they read, to follow the threads of Buddhist discourses on the nature of self through her genealogical labyrinth, and to engage with her text as a literary version of koan practice.

My aim in this essay will be to examine how in each of the four sections of the first volume, *Souvenirs pieux* (1974), translated as *Dear Departed* by Maria Louise Ascher (1991), Yourcenar’s inquiry into her “original face” leads her to test the strategies and resources available in Western forms of self-writing, particularly autobiography, genealogy, and literary memoir. Their failure to lead her to an answer to the koan serves as an incisive critique of their philosophical foundations and the veracity of the knowledge they produce. At the same time, the inscription of nondual Buddhist perspectives on the nature of self highlight latent possibilities within the genres for a re-evaluation of an understanding of lineage beyond the familial and tribal in space and time.

1. Birth

Like most autobiographical accounts, *Dear Departed* begins with the introduction of the self that creates it. The very first sentence marks its arrival: “the being that I refer to as me came into the world” ([Yourcenar 1991](#), p. 11), and is followed by a lengthy description of the birth scene. However, rather than using this occasion to fix this fluid, unformed newborn “self” into some kind of identity, Yourcenar instead questions the whole endeavor:

Having set down these few facts, which mean nothing in themselves and which, nevertheless, for each one of us, lead beyond the confines of our own individualized history and even beyond History, I am obliged to pause, dizzied by the hopeless tangle of incidents and circumstances which to a greater or lesser extent shapes us all. That girl-child, already fixed by the space-time coordinates of the Christian era and twentieth-century Europe, that speck of pink flesh wailing in a blue cradle, compels me to ask a series of questions which are all the more daunting for their apparent banality and which any other author worthy of the name will strive to avoid. ([Yourcenar 1991](#), pp. 3–4)

The initial response to the question of her “original face” reveals a stance of unknowing. Using the subjunctive and conditional tenses and words such as “unreality” and “unaware”, Yourcenar links each reference to self with doubt. Her only recourse in creating an identity is to piece together stray,

specious bits of information to perform some kind of retroactive reconstruction that could serve as a link between the child in the crib and the adult author:

That the child is in fact myself I can hardly doubt without doubting everything. Still, to overcome in part the feeling of unreality that this identification gives me, I am forced—just as if I were trying to create some historical personage—to seize on stray reflections gleaned secondhand or even tenth-hand; to pore over scraps of correspondence and notebook pages which somehow escaped the wastebasket (so eager are we to know the past that we wring from these poor relics more than they contain); and to burrow in registries and archives for original documents whose legal and bureaucratic jargon is devoid of human content. I am quite aware that such gleanings are deceptive and vague, like everything that has been reinterpreted by the memories of a great many people; flat, like items written on the dotted line of a passport application; inane, like oft-told family anecdotes; and corroded by gradual accretions within us, as stone is eaten by lichen or metal by rust. (1991, p. 4)

What can be considered the “thesis” of this trilogy follows almost immediately: “Mildly curious, I set about assembling them here, to see what the completed puzzle will reveal: the image of a certain person and several others, of a milieu, of a place, and here and there a fleeting glimpse of something nameless and formless” (Yourcenar 1991, p. 4). As such, Yourcenar proposes to do what self-writing cannot. Through these carefully constructed images of self as “assemblage” (which calls to mind the Buddhist description of self as an assemblage of form, feeling, perception, impulses, and consciousness), Yourcenar highlights the interdependent and constructed nature of the phenomenal self, and by extension, that of the text. By calling the existence of an essential selfhood into question, Yourcenar calls the fundamental premises of all forms of self-writing into question. By foregrounding the fact that writing the autobiographical self entails the same methodologies of writing biography and fiction, she dismantles assumptions of greater truth or authenticity. However, given that autobiography and genealogy are the only generic models readily available through her literary and cultural heritage, Yourcenar opts for a compromise: she is forced to provisionally adopt them, as a kind of skillful means (in Buddhist term, *upaya*), on the way to rewriting them altogether.

What Yourcenar ultimately accomplishes in the opening of *Dear Departed* is to weave a narrative thread around the space the self—if it could be found—would occupy. She begins with the invisible and tenuous threads between herself as narrator and herself as an infant: “These odds and ends of purported truths are, nevertheless, the only bridge still standing between that infant and me. They are also the only buoy that keeps us both afloat on the ocean of time” (1991, p. 4). However, unable to close the distance between the autobiographical subject and its object, she then extends the thread to trace the connections between the self and the immediate causes and conditions that comprise it: “This baby girl, hardly an hour old, is in any case already caught, as in a net, in the realities of animal suffering and of human pain. She is caught too, in the futilities of a time, in the major and minor news items of the daily paper [. . .] in that which is fashionable and that which is routine” (1991, p. 23).

The linking of “little girl” (*fillette*) and “net” (*filet*) can be seen as a play on words that lends itself to a psychoanalytic reading. For Lacan, the “birth” of the individual autobiographical subject occurs when it emerges from the nondual, fluid, unformed semiotic (marked as feminine) into the symbolic (marked as masculine) realm of language, meaning, gender, and difference. In *Dear Departed*, the unborn child becomes an individual gendered entity only through its separation from the maternal body at birth. Its emergence into the structures of the symbolic is further reinforced by the death of the mother and the role that the father will play in becoming the sole parent and educator. As “author” of the child (as fathers were idiomatically thought to be), it is he who, as *auctoritas*, will inscribe within the child the net of social structures and norms that will comprise her social identity. As a literary author, he is also positioned as *auctoritas* in the sense of writers whose words and truths, which may not be challenged by further generations, will inform her own. The resemblance of *filet* and *fillette*, as if they were corresponding masculine and feminine forms of the same word, works to create a subliminal equivalence in the reader’s mind, suggesting that somehow the father and daughter are

somehow versions of each other, and that the little girl (*fillette*) will grow up to take his place in the social, historical, and geographical spaces (the *filet*) that he occupies and represents. However, this reading, which is constructed from theoretical perspectives based upon binary oppositions, cannot bring Yourcenar or the reader any closer to an understanding of her “original face” which, by necessity, must eclipse formation in dualistic thought.

Through a nondual Buddhist lens, the linking of the little girl (*fillette*) and the net (*filet*) takes on a completely different meaning. Yourcenar’s play on words points directly to the famous image of the net in the Avatamsaka Sutra in Mahayana Buddhism. The sutra depicts a vast net of precious pearls strung over Indra’s celestial palace where each pearl not only reflects and is reflected by all others as if in an endless hall of mirrors, but is, in fact, all others and the net itself. As a visual metaphor for the completely interdependent nature of existence, Indra’s net evokes “a cosmic vision on the grandest scale [. . .] a universe where everything freely interpenetrates everything else, where totality may be contemplated and ultimate truth realized in even the tiniest speck of dust” (Snelling 1991, pp. 130–31). Just as it is impossible to separate the strings and knots that comprise a net from a net, the *fillette* cannot be separated from the causes and conditions of her existence. Rather, like one of these pearls that the sutra describes, the *fillette* reflects and is reflected by all other existences. She is at once a microcosm and the totality of her familial and human lineages, and as such, the net itself.

Once the understanding of *fillette* = *filet* is established, what immediately follows, as one would expect in a Buddhist reading, are representations of suffering: the samsaric net of birth-and-death in which all of existence is bound and to which all existence contributes. The birth of the child leads to the death of the mother a few days later. The milk she receives to live will come from a cow whose calf has been taken from her so that her milk can be as well:

The rich nourishment comes from a nursing creature, animal symbol of the fertile earth that gives men not only her milk, but later, when her udders are finally exhausted, and her lean flesh, and last her hide, tendons and bones, which are made into glue and bone charcoal. Torn from her familiar pastures, she will die a death that is almost always agonizing, after the long, lurching journey in the cattle car that will convey her to the slaughterhouse, often bruised, deprived of water, frightened” [. . .]. She will arrive panting at the place of execution, the rope around her neck, sometimes blinded in one eye, delivered into the hands of butchers [. . .] who perhaps will cut her up before she is completely dead. (Yourcenar 1991, pp. 24–25)

The exquisite needlework draped on the crib from an exclusive boutique in Lille was most likely acquired for a few *sous* from an impoverished woman trying to scrape together a living for her family (1991, p. 24). The ivory used for a devotional trinket in the nursery symbolizes entire systems of suffering and exploitation of animals, humans, and the earth leading back toward the beginnings of life itself:

The ivory comes from an elephant killed in the forests of the Congo, whose tusks the natives sold for a pittance to some Belgian trader. That great mass of intelligent life, descendent of a dynasty extending back at least to the beginning of the Pleistocene, has been reduced to this. The trinket was once part of an animal that nibbled tender leaves and drank from streams, that bathed in the good warm mud, that used this ivory to battle a rival [. . .], that stroked with its trunk the female with which it was mating. (Yourcenar 1991, p. 24)

Within a single hour of existence, the *fillette* is firmly located within the visible network of all living beings as well as the entire invisible network of nonexistence, memory, and the past. This articulation of birth-and-death in the same breath has important consequences for the status and function of the autobiographical/genealogical subject. Shortly after its arrival, the newborn is almost forgotten in the events surrounding the funeral. Displaced from the center of the narrative, the self loses its status as its focal point, becoming instead the means through which the reader enters into the textual net and the inquiry of the koan.

2. Warp and Weft

In her first attempt to weave the text together, Yourcenar adopts the usual strategy of autobiographical writing: narrative coherence through the medium of the narrative voice, primarily in the form of repeated interventions. To trace the links between herself and the past, the “I” assumes a series of professional and authoritative voices as if to test their possible validity.

As a genealogist, Yourcenar is careful to insert a diagram of her family tree in the opening pages and to describe her sources and her process:

For the plunge into her ancestral past, I shall make use of the meager facts I gleaned from genealogies and from works by local scholars. For more recent years, I shall rely on the remembrances of Fernande, transmitted by Michel. The history of my paternal background, whose details are more familiar to me, and my father’s history, which I can glimpse in the anecdotes I heard from him tell and retell, are closely related to my own, and the same is true of the locales and regions where I spent my childhood. They are inseparable from my own memories [. . .]. (1991, p. 61)

As an anthropologist, the narrator gathers information from “fragmentary family recollections” (Yourcenar 1991, p. 228) and oral traditions passed down through generations. She thanks her informants and interviewees in an author’s note, but is sure to obliquely note their limited usefulness:

A middle-aged woman who had come to the library to return a book either recognized me or heard my name spoken. She had been my Aunt Louise’s chambermaid. From her, I learned all the latest news of the family. [. . .] Sitting beside me on a bench in the park, my informant continued her narrative, which was, to be sure, brief. (Yourcenar 1991, pp. 98–99)

As a historian, Yourcenar points to her research: articles from newspapers and local publications, literary texts and correspondence by and about family members. She uses “found” documents (such as the list Michel made to record Fernande’s pulse and temperature as she was dying, or the letter from the church regarding burial costs), and bits of information from archives, often sceptically: “If one can believe local accounts” (1991, p. 61); “(the texts I have in hand contradict one another, and reconciling them would take more research than the information is worth)” (1991, p. 77); “That document contained no surprises” (1991, p. 276); and “At least the account incorporates whatever was retained [. . .] by the eleven-year-old girl who was listening” (1991, p. 257).

Yourcenar adopts a professorial stance, taking care to remind readers that it is she who is presenting and directing the text for her readers to follow: “I shall now take advantage of the momentum acquired in the foregoing pages” (1991, p. 61); “Let us look for a moment at this cluster of dwellings” (1991, p. 72); “I digress here less than one might think” (1991, p. 73); “I think the time has come to introduce Mathilde’s ten children” (1991, p. 127); “In order to place these two men once again in their proper perspective” (1991, p. 228); “Let us look somewhat more closely at this indistinct Arthur” (1991, p. 271).

However, these overt strategies to claim narrative authority and truth are simultaneously subverted. There are moments where Yourcenar questions: “It seems unlikely that Octave’s highly discreet death could give rise to legends” (1991, p. 218) and “If I am not mistaken” (1991, p. 225). There are places where she deliberately casts doubt: “It is always hazardous to explain the life of a man in terms of the single chapter of it he has recounted for us” (1991, p. 214). There are errors: “Other reports, ones without any foundation whatsoever” (1991, p. 219). There are gaps in her information: “The little I have found out” (1991, p. 13); “This omission, which could hardly have been the result of simple forgetfulness” (1991, p. 136); and “Though lacking any documentation on the subject” (1991, p. 253). There is much she does not know: “I have fewer details concerning Fernande’s state of mind” (1991, p. 15); “What follows here is, in contrast, foreign to me” (1991, p. 61). She admits that sometimes all she has to work with is “a long series of direct and collateral ancestors about whom I know nothing, aside from their dates of birth and death” (1991 p. 228).

As the text unfolds, it becomes clear that the *vérité* being evoked is, despite painstaking recourse to all available information, essentially speculative. She writes: “I like to believe that” (1991, p. 72); “there must have been a fair number of people at the funeral” (1991, p. 140). There are also instances where Yourcenar makes it clear that she is inventing: “Nevertheless I evoke” (1991, p. 64) and “Let us try to conjure up that house as it must have been” (1991, p. 107), as well as times where she reminds readers that she is more narrator than author: “I make no claim to imitate here the style of the teller” (1991, p. 257).

Abandoning any semblance of professional or authoritative “objective” stance in light of its inability to arrive at truth, Yourcenar then turns to explore the resources of fiction to imaginatively and empathically re-enact the lives of her “characters.” She intuits the feelings behind their words: “But it is enough to give me the tone and rhythm of what those two people said in intimate moments, seated near each other in a house that disappeared sixty-nine years ago” (1991, p. 19). She tries to inhabit their minds and experiences: “I shall attempt to fill the gaps in his brief account with the aid of excerpts from other works, to enter into the thoughts of this distant relation of mine, so as to experience along with him the events of a certain day ninety-seven years in the past” (1991, p. 145). She fleshes out the skeletons of documented details about her mother’s death by writing it as the scene of a play, with images of her father waiting and servants warming themselves with tea by the fire. Yourcenar notes that as a whole: “Even if all the details came together as a sort of romanticized montage, the nature of my project necessitated that they be authentic” (Yourcenar 1980, p. 215, translation mine). Her intention becomes like a Proustian the retrieval of lost time:

Life gone by is a withered, cracked leaf, without sap or chlorophyll, riddled with holes, frayed and torn, which, when held up to the light, reveals at most the skeletal tracery of its slender, brittle veins. Certain efforts are required to give it once more the fleshy green appearance of a new leaf, to restore to events and incidents that fullness which satisfies the people who live them and which keeps people from imagining anything else. (Yourcenar 1991, pp. 115–16)

Yet empathic literary re-embodiment, no matter how authentic, well done, or well intended, falls short. While the appearance of life and events may captivate us momentarily, readers cannot escape the inherent inventedness of using fiction to tell truths that facts cannot. Her method is one of magicians creating credible illusions, or that of a hypnotist making readers believe they see what is not there. In the very process of tracking down what can be known about her family and ancestors and articulating the connections of blood and temperament that bind them, Yourcenar emphasizes the futility of her effort and, hence, the failure of the narrative voice as an exclusive, or even primary, strategy. Somewhat defensively, Yourcenar brushes aside any anticipated criticism from readers by noting the inconsequential nature of her interjections and interferences: “We are dealing here with history of a very minor sort” (1991, p. 335). She also cites a note from a family member that absolves her in advance from any infelicities: “Even if historical truth were not respected, no one could reproach you for it. Besides, it’s not an easy task to render this truth, for in that vicious circle of contradictory emotions, with their multiple interactions, it is impossible to say which is cause and which is effect” (1991, p. 339). To this, Yourcenar adds:

Remarks like these cannot but reassure all biographers, historians, and novelists who are searching for a truth that is multiple, unstable, evasive, sometimes saddening, and, at first glance, scandalous, but one cannot approach without often feeling for human beings, in all their frailty, a certain measure of kinship and, always, a sense of pity. (1991, p. 339)

Visiting family graves at Suarlée for the first time, some fifty-three years after her birth, she notes in despair that they are always beyond the reach of her voice: “Despite all my efforts, I did not succeed in establishing a rapport between those people lying there and myself” (1991, p. 44). At best, she only knew a few aunts and uncles. Her own mother remains a complete unknown: “I had traversed Fernande; I had nourished myself for several months on her substance, but the facts I gleaned were

cold knowledge to me, as if they had come from a textbook. Her grave affected me no more than that of an unknown woman whose death someone might describe to me briefly and in passing" (Yourcenar 1991, p. 45). While it proves even more difficult to imagine Fernande's parents (that were less known to her than Baudelaire), she does find a slender thread to link them to her: "Yet beyond this gentleman and this lady enclosed in their nineteenth century are ranks of thousands of ancestors extending back to prehistory and then, losing all human resemblance, to the very origin of life on earth. Half the amalgam of which I consist was there" (Yourcenar 1991, p. 45). Yet in the next moment, she shows that the thread is even more insubstantial than she originally supposed:

Half? After that process of reblending, which makes each of us a unique creature, how could one calculate the percentage of moral or physical traits I inherited from them? I might as well have dissected my own bones to analyze and weigh the minerals that compose them. If, moreover (as I believe more firmly with every passing day), it is not blood and sperm alone that make us what we are, every calculation of this sort is false from the start. Nevertheless, Arthur and Mathilde were at the second intersection of the lines that connect me with everything. Whatever our hypotheses about the shadowy realm from which we come and to which we return, it is always bad to eliminate the simple, banal facts—[. . .] Arthur and Mathilde were my grandfather and grandmother. I was Fernande's daughter. (Yourcenar 1991, p. 45)

Reversing the direction of filiation, Yourcenar does not figure at all in the minds or lives of her ancestors: "Furthermore I realized, as I reflected on those graves at Suarlée, that I was relating those people too closely to myself. If Arthur, Mathilde, and Fernande were almost nothing to me, I was even less to them" (1991, p. 45). For her mother, she was only "first, an uncertainty; then a hope, an apprehension, a fear, and for several hours, a torture. In the days that followed my birth, she must have sometimes felt for me stirrings of tenderness, of surprise, perhaps of pride" (1991, p. 46). For her grandparents, she might have been one of those vague grandchildren alluded to in a marriage ceremony (1991, p. 46). In any case, the distance cannot be bridged: "My palms resting on the iron railing were stained with rust. Generations of weeds had flourished since the day that gate had reopened to admit the last arrival" (1991, p. 46). The best she can offer, since libations for the dead are no longer in fashion, is the wish of "good luck on the inevitable road we all must travel" (1991, p. 47). Fernande, like the rest of them, is consigned to oblivion. Her dresses were given to charity, her jewels sold or reset. The possessions, like their owner, were dispersed into nothingness. Even the generalities and the usual prayers printed on her funeral memorial cards serve to efface her among the dead. The one remaining box of memorabilia with Fernande's pictures, an envelope with locks of her hair and other assorted knickknacks which had some sentimental value, leave the surviving daughter not with a sense of who her mother was, but instead with a sense of the fleeting and insubstantial nature of self:

We know that such knickknacks were once treasured by someone, that they were occasionally useful, and that their chief value lay in the extent to which they helped to define or enhance the image that person had of himself. But the death of their owner renders them worthless, like the playthings one finds in tombs. Nothing shows better the insignificance of our human individuality, which we prize so highly, than the rapidity with which those objects that support it and sometimes symbolize it are, in their turn, outmoded, outworn, or lost. (Yourcenar 1991, p. 57)

This sense of despair, with regard to the impermanence of human individuality, is coupled in her evocation of the historical moment. On her way to Suarlée from Munster, the events of the present: the kidnapping of Ben Bella, the beginning of the Suez canal, rumors of black markets and atomic radiation, the invasion of Budapest by the Soviets . . . all will be as quickly forgotten as the independence of Indochina from the French. At the Musée d'Art Ancien in Brussels, the paintings are all scenes from history and mythology rendered into art and allegory. Just as Fernande and her mother's family were

marked by the events that surrounded them, she too is marked and, in some way, shaped by the events that unfold in the world around her. The impersonality of cause and effect, the seemingly inevitable downward course of history, and symbolic representations of death and destruction appear to indicate that it is neither possible to find some essentiality or permanence in beings or time, even in art, nor to recover that which is already lost.

However, it is only through this sense of loss that a new understanding can emerge. The impermanence of self negates any kind of essentiality. The “I” of the text, like Fernande, can only be traversed. Despite the attempt to create the illusion of agency, control, or center, the narrative voice falls back upon its own insubstantiality. The shattering of these illusions allows Yourcenar to move beyond the boundary of self and other and to realize a kind of empathic interconnection with Fernande, which foreshadows the rest of her text: “Today, however, my current effort to recapture and recount her history fills me with a sympathy for her that I have not felt heretofore. She is much like these characters, imaginary or real, that I nourish with my own substance to try and make them live, or live once again” (Yourcenar 1991, p. 53).

3. Crossings: “The Tour of the Châteaux”

In the second part of *Dear Departed*, Yourcenar confounds the expectations of her readers with a sudden shift of emphasis. Instead of continuing her narrative in a linear direction with an account of her childhood, Yourcenar turns to reconstruct her mother’s line from its first appearance in history—“A certain knight named Libier de Quartier, married to one Ide de Hollogne [. . .] of the city of Liège in 1366” (1991, pp. 61–62)—from the life of her maternal grandmother, Mathilde. However, this shift is really just the continuation of the inquiry from where she just left off in the previous section. While the defining characteristic of autobiography centers on a self, which is both subject and object of the narrative, an equally important aspect is how the inscription of that self is contingent upon how it is framed and expressed through its historical moment. It is therefore natural that after testing and rejecting autobiographical resources of self and narrative voice to reveal her “original face”, Yourcenar then turns it to test the possibilities of history and its related disciplines, genealogy and geology.

What is interesting about the way Yourcenar does this, however, is that she frames her narrative through another *filet*, this time geographical. By a tour through the estates where her mother’s family once lived, Yourcenar presents what she describes in *Les Yeux ouverts* as “the group of related or allied families that end up covering, like a net, an entire territory” (1980, p. 206, translation mine), which allows her to present her ancestors in their historical moments as well as from multiple perspectives and chronologies. Her itinerary from Flémalle to Marchienne and to Suarlée, which crosses the Liège region in Belgium, functions as a sort of pilgrimage, a search for some of her origins and a glimpse of her original face through the historical and physical remains of those who had preceded her. However, the function of these chronicles is not just to trace her family lines but also to locate them in increasingly larger historical contexts: “There would be hardly any point to evoking the history of a family if it did not offer us a window unto the history of a small state of old Europe” (Yourcenar 1991, p. 63).

Yourcenar begins these evocations by linking the region in which her family has lived with Liège, the city founded by the legendary St. Hubert. His descendant, Charlemagne, becomes naturalized in the family as French, as “one of their own” (Yourcenar 1991, p. 63, translation mine), thus connecting the family and city to the origins of France and its first literature, *la chanson de geste*. By the year 1000, Liège is linked to the Carolingian and Ottoman renaissances, and by extension, Rome and Byzantium. Narrowly missing the Renaissance of the sixteenth century, Liège still manages to have its share of the liberal bourgeoisie of the Enlightenment and later becomes almost an extension of Paris during the Revolution (Yourcenar 1991, pp. 78–79). In this way, Liège comes to stand not only for France but Europe and the whole of Western Christendom itself. The widening of Yourcenar’s inquiry and field of vision brings about a corresponding widening of the net of interconnections, which foreshadows the central strategy of the section. By using specific instances of family history and sites in which they lived as points of intersection between vertical lines of history and the horizontal lines of geography,

Yourcenar weaves a sort of textual net, another *filet*, which can be infinitely extended through time and space, and thus ultimately connects, through other existing networks, to the whole of existence, creating more of a holographic perspective. Generalizing on this experience, Yourcenar notes that this is but a single example of a much larger process, and one that is not particular to the experience of her own family: “But these stories have their value: they help us appreciate the extent to which every family, from century to century, has felt itself involved in the vicissitudes of war in that country which was continually being overrun” (1991, p. 102). This metaphor of traversing and being traversed, which was used in the earlier context of Yourcenar’s passing through the body of Fernande in the process of being born, begins to acquire a certain poetic resonance and greater depth, signaling that this dynamic might have some metaphysical import: “All of humanity passes through us, and if they do so through a family or a particular milieu of our childhood, it is but one accident of chance among all others” (1980, p. 209, translation mine). The point of this section is not just to come to a realization about how existence is linked together in some objectified way, but also for Yourcenar to realize her own place in it: the net that comprised the self in “Birth” is the same net which comprises and connects everything else but in a larger context: “But when one looks closely, going beyond the conventional view of genealogy, one arrives at something else, which is almost vertigo” (Yourcenar 2002, p. 171, translation mine).

This insistence on things passing and being passed through, which becomes a meditation on impermanence, also serves to confront the intertwined ideologies of history and individualism in autobiography and its twin genre, genealogy. In Western forms of the genres, the ideology of an essential, unified, and independent self finds its correlative in a view of time as both chronological and linear, a flow from the past to the present held together through consciousness. As Yourcenar experiments with a nonessential and interdependent self, she must also reframe her presentation of history to reflect a view of time and space as interdependent and impermanent constructs. To clear the view for a glimpse of her original face, Yourcenar performs a double deconstruction: using history to undo the individual, and the individual to undo history, allowing her, in the end, to inscribe individuals without individualism, history without historicism.

4. Two Travelers Bound for the Realm Immutable

In the third section of *Dear Departed*, there is another radical shift in focus toward the possibilities and limitations of literary resources in individual and collective biographical writing. Here, in this pivotal section of the text, concerns about establishing networks around family history and relationships are replaced by a meditation on writing, as a form of telepathic sympathy, to articulate unseen and mystical links beyond the limits of existence. Yourcenar’s own role in the narrative diminishes as she foregrounds the efforts of her Uncle Octave Pirmez, the Belgian essayist who embarks upon a literary odyssey so as not to lose the tenuous link with his dead brother, Rémo.

As Octave’s journey begins with a visit to his dying uncle, Louis Troye, Yourcenar announces her intersubjective and intertextual intentions: to enter into the mind of Octave through his writings, and, in the process, retrace his literary journey of finding lost connections with other dead relatives. This link forged between death and literature is in no way arbitrary. As Yourcenar’s evocation of Octave suggests, biography is possible only through death, memory beyond death possible only through literature. Octave’s “passionate fondness for contemplating the end of things” (1991, p. 145) translates itself directly into his and Yourcenar’s work. Acknowledging the strangeness of this almost “necromantic enterprise” (1991, p. 186), Yourcenar enters into a long staged inner dialogue between Octave and his memory of Rémo, only to later claim her role in the narrative as a medium and to underscore the ways in which she and Octave, the two travelers, are linked:

It is less the shade of Octave that I evoke at nearly a century’s remove than Octave himself, who, on a certain twenty-third of October 1875, comes and goes unaccompanied unwittingly by a “grandniece” who will not be born until twenty years after his death, who on the day she made up her mind to haunt him retrospectively, was approximately as old as Madame Irénée was then. Such are the mirror games of time. (1991, p. 186)

This meeting is significant in terms of establishing not only a direct familial connection with her uncle but, more importantly, a spiritual and literary filiation that transcends the imagined boundaries of past and present. From Rémo, via Octave's recuperation, Yourcenar can lay claim to an inheritance of subtle affinities. Like her great-uncles, she read Hesiod and Theocritus under the trees at her family's estate. Like Rémo, she experienced a period of enthusiasm in her twenties for Greece, which later shifted toward the East: "The ocean of tears he borrows from the Buddhist sutras by way of Schopenhauer was one whose shores I myself walked along at an early age; my first books prove it to me, at the very places where my memories lose their sharpness" (Yourcenar 1991, p. 232). Remo's mysticism inspired her as it did her uncle:

From time to time, it is true, the "radiant soul" gave Octave glimpses of dazzling lights from another horizon. "He had perceived a new link in the chain that, in the infinite unity, connects all creatures together". ("Qui est deus? Mens universi", murmurs David de Dinant six hundred years earlier, as he is consumed by the flames). And the elder brother [. . .] receives the sometimes visionary confidences of his younger sibling: "It is when I cease to feel my personality, it is—in a word—when I cease to be, that I am truly satisfied. But those moments of joy are like brilliant flashes of light; they make the darkness of my daily existence even more apparent". (Yourcenar 1991, pp. 164–65)

She even took Rémo's motto to be her own: "The feeling of being useful—I must have this in order to live" (Yourcenar 1991, p. 161). Like Octave, her original dream was to write anonymously—"Literary creation is a torrent that carries everything along with it; in this stream, our personal characteristics are, at the most, sediments" (Yourcenar 1991, p. 235)—and to connect with all those she could never possibly meet: "Whether or not I succeeded in conjuring up "Uncle Octave" outside the somewhat yellowed pages of these volumes, I hope to free him at least for some brief time from the polite indifference that surrounds and, to a certain extent, protects, within graveyards of our libraries" (Yourcenar 1991, pp. 191–92). But as she notes, there is a miracle in every coincidence: there is always another way to find traces of the myriad interconnections that bind us to each other and all others. Instead of biography, which is limited due to its dependence on words and facts, art communicates more directly, purely, and intuitively. Illustrating this, Yourcenar notes that she carried around the image, half icon and half talisman, of a painting of the Uffizi, "The Thébaid of Egypt", which for her depicted a perfected, angelic life. She discovered years later that Octave was also fascinated by this same painting and wrote a short piece on it.

This coincidence sets up the next, and a striking one at that. In the summer of either 1879 or 1880, Octave and his mother took a brief trip to a small fishing village, Heyst, which turns out, by complete coincidence, to be exactly the same village to which Zeno, her beloved protagonist in *The Abyss*, traveled to escape to England: "Zeno precedes Octave at this point on the globe by three centuries, twelve years, and one month, almost to the day, but I shall not create him until forty years later, and the episode of the swim off the beach at Heyst will not take shape in my mind until 1965" (1991, pp. 238–39). In this, her last evocation of Octave, Yourcenar imagines him walking on the beach at midday and suddenly traversed by Zeno, going in the opposite direction:

Suddenly, in the bright light of midday, appears a shabbily dressed man who walks past him and the English ladies without seeing them. *Aqua permanens*. The vast expanse of water, so terrifying to Octave, is a purifying element to this stranger. For him, the surf and its dispassionate violence, the infinity of sand grains encompassed in his every stride, and the pure curve of each seashell compose a mathematical, perfect world that compensates for the atrocious one in which he must live. (1991, p. 238)

This purely imagined moment of Zeno passing through Octave, fiction passing through biography—using the alchemical metaphor of a purifying baptismal rebirth in the divine primal water of the true nature of self (which could also be described as buddha nature)—foreshadows the strategy

Yourcenar uses in the last section of the book. After first struggling with the limits and failures of biography and “writing about”, she now rejects it to adopt this new intersubjective model of writing “through” as a form of mediumship or mind-to-mind transmission. The illustration of Octave and Zeno’s “interbeing” with Yourcenar, as author, is not fortuitous, but yet another version of the image of Indra’s net:

The only link between these two men—the invisible one, who does not yet exist but who carries with him his clothes and the accouterments of the sixteenth century, and the dandy of 1880, who, in three years, will be a phantom—is the fact that a little girl to whom Octave enjoys telling stories bears suspended within her, infinitely potential, a part of what I shall someday become. [...] Time and dates ricochet, just as the sun’s rays ricochet off the tidal pools and grains of sand. (1991, pp. 238–39)

Who are the two travelers? Is it Louis Troyes and Octave? Octave and Rémo? Yourcenar and Octave? Yourcenar and Rémo (through Octave)? Octave and Zeno? Yourcenar and Fernande (through Octave)? The title of this section remains deliciously ambiguous. Are all of these, each exploring a different angle, a different point of interconnection? The answer would seem to be yes, with the addition of Yourcenar and the text, the reader and the text, and Yourcenar and the reader (through the text): each inextricably linked to/as the other and all others, forming an unseen net of readers and readings. The title also suggests another possibility: that of literature as the vehicle of all travel to immutable regions and the impossibility of traveling alone. Yourcenar’s task will no longer be to write about her subject, herself in/as Fernande, but from now on, through her.

5. *Filer, Filation, Fille*

In the final part of *Dear Departed*, Yourcenar returns to the point of origin, both her own and that of the text, to weave together (*filer*) loose threads of filiation back into a seamless whole. “Fernande” opens as did “Birth”, with the birth of a daughter and the death of a mother. In this instance, it is that of her grandmother, Mathilde, who passes away when her daughter was a toddler. Fernande, who also has no connection to her mother except for the fact that she passed through her, finds, as will her own daughter, parts of herself in her uncles: Rémo, whom she resembles physically and by temperament, and Octave, whose stories spark her imagination. Whereas Yourcenar had failed to connect earlier with her mother in the text, by the end, she finds that by sympathetically occupying the same places and experiences that Fernande had once lived, it becomes clear that they share in the same stream of life, but in different bodies, times, and circumstances. The evocation of Fernande’s childhood at Suarlée, surrounded by siblings and Fraulein the governess, pieced together patiently like scraps of lace, becomes an act of love. Moving from the transcendent and impersonal mysticism of Rémo, this final section becomes a way for Yourcenar to express care and affection for the particular, a single spark of life. As Yourcenar finally becomes able to step into the place of her mother, she discovers that they were never really separate in the first place.

The embedded story of Saint Rolende and her lover, told to Fernande by Octave, throws the relationships between the narrator, her mother, and the text even more sharply into relief. Rolende was promised by her father to a prince, but refusing the match, she flees into the wilderness to become a hermit. The prince, determined to win her heart, follows her and also becomes a hermit. The two, who never meet or exchange a word, are joined in death. When the villagers go to place his body in her tomb, they find her skeletal arms open to embrace him. Not bound by any of the usual forms of connection, the saint and her lover are nonetheless bound by a spiritual connection, an unseen thread that transcends all the accidents of circumstance, linking them beyond both life and death.

One way to read this episode is to see the relations between characters as a storied reflection of *Dear Departed* itself: Fernande as Rolende, the inaccessible, and Yourcenar as the lover, who follows her, lives as she does, and realizes the true cords that connect them beyond life. Another way is to see the embedded story within a larger narrative as literary embodiment of a fetus embedded in a womb.

However, just as Fernande carried the author as child physically, the reverse is also true, but with the author now carrying the mother in memory and narrative, signaling that their identities and roles in the story, or any story, cannot be fixed or limited. A third highlights the interconnected net of all narrative itself, woven by myriad unseen threads through the warp and weft of speech and silence, telling and listening, reading and writing. Yourcenar relates the story told by Octave to his niece Fernande. However, the story from some unknown source that Octave retold was not of his creation. The version that appeared in *Dear Departed* was not in his style or even his version, but simply the one that Fernande remembered and that somehow made its way to Yourcenar years later for a retelling, appearing again here in a new context for new readers with a new agenda. Each version and each telling implies all past and future ones, includes all past and future tellers and listeners, and like pearls in Indra's net, each version reflects and is reflected by all others. Tracing back a possible source of the story to a land that her mother's line once occupied allows Yourcenar to remind readers that a realization of the interconnected nature of self and stories implies a realization of radical inseparability despite conventional appearances: "It seems that such a story, learned in childhood, must surely leave its mark [. . .]. But something of it remained, like gossamer on a summer's morning" (1991, pp. 259–60).

The reference to gossamer, a thread at once infinitely fragile but firm, ephemeral but somehow as eternal as summer and life, is particularly revealing as a metaphor of connection. In French, gossamer is *fil de la Vierge*, or more literally "thread of the Virgin." It evokes the metaphorical lineage of the Virgin Mary: all her mothers and daughters, all women, in an infinite line to the eternities of past and future. More specifically in the context of *Dear Departed*, it evokes the lineage of virgins in the tale and its telling: Rolande, Fernande, and Marguerite herself: the *fillette* as the *fil* which binds them all together. It also brings to mind Ariadne, trying to solve an impossible problem by using thread to trace her path through the labyrinth, and by extension Oedipus, answering the riddle of the sphinx like a koan.

Gazing at a photograph of her mother, however, leads to a vision. Noting the particular tilt of an eye, Yourcenar suddenly sees the singularity of her mother and at the exact moment, her reflection in the innumerable mothers of her line behind her, each standing, for a moment, in the place of the other:

Behind this young lady in her voluminous skirts, I glimpse the plucky girls in striped breeches who followed their men into Macedonia or up the Capitoline slopes and those who were sold at auction after Caesar's campaigns. I even go back several more centuries to the women "of the tribes dwelling deep in huts", allegedly from the region of the Upper Danube, who used to draw water in their buckets of gray clay. (1991, p. 267)

Yet even this vision is not enough. To reach Fernande, Yourcenar shifts the narrative back to those who knew her best, and tries, to no avail, to glean understanding of her through the eyes of her grandfather, aunts, and uncles. Who Fernande is as a child escapes her. As an adolescent, she is "more mysterious" (1991, p. 267). As a young woman interested in neither marriage nor convent, "Fernande wanted something different, without quite knowing what" (Yourcenar 1991, p. 289). The description of her acquaintance with Michel, as well as that of their courtship, marriage, and few early years together traveling, although brief, exudes a sweet intimacy and nostalgia that goes beyond the more clinical description of Fernande's earlier years, but brings her no closer.

However, the very last paragraph which describes an image of Fernande, newly pregnant with Marguerite—thus nine months before her death—offers us a glimpse:

Like a traveler on the deck of a transatlantic liner, she reclines on a chaise longue at the edge of the terrace, from which one sees, or thinks one sees, beyond the pale green expanse of the rolling plain, the distant gray line of the sea. Majestic clouds drift into the open sky, like those once sketched in this same region by painters of seventeenth-century battles. Fernande spreads a lap robe over her knees, languidly opens a book, and gives a caress to Trier, who is curled up by her feet. My face begins to take shape on the screen of time. (Yourcenar 1991, p. 332)

Although what will be “Marguerite” does not yet exist in time, and Fernande is already moving to space beyond the horizon, for this moment, they are not separate. At this point of intersection, Yourcenar finds her original face in their mutuality, their shared aliveness, as a reverberation in the net that binds them with all that is. Like a Zen student wrestling with a koan who has explored every possibility only to return to the question with empty hands, Yourcenar tests and rejects all options available to her: narratives of self, genealogy, history, literature and stories, only to return to a place of not-knowing, beyond thought and words, where something inexplicable is suddenly revealed. *Dear Departed* ends before it begins, passing through itself to arrive at its point of origin like a knot being made with string, weaving emptiness as form, and form as emptiness like as a net, but with a new understanding.

6. Writing the Genealogy of No-Self?

“Show me your face before your parents were born”, says the Buddhist koan [...]. For Neruda, that face becomes a poetry of all things: a long praise-song to salt in the mines and in the ocean, to a wristwatch ticking the night’s darkness like a tiny saw cutting time, to the dead body of a fish in the market. In the light of the poet’s abundance of heart and imagination, we remember the threshold is a place at once empty and full. It is on the margins, where one thing meets another [...]. (Hirschfield 1998, p. 213)

What does Yourcenar’s literary experiment of koan practice offer? By undercutting the metaphysical foundation of Western traditions and calling into question the fictionality inherent in any form, written or otherwise, of self-making, Yourcenar achieves what feminist and postmodern approaches strive for. By undoing the “autobiographical pact” and implied historical objectivity of genealogy, the power relations of authority in the authorial stance unravel. The model put forth by St. Augustine, the mythologizing history of noble blood lineages of medieval kings and warriors, the “self-made” men documenting the trials and tribulations overcome through superior will, the heroic journeys and tragic consequences, the separating out of that which is to be lauded, followed, idealized, pitied, hated, or feared—all suddenly seem not so solid. The pillars on which the model stands become less firm and imposing. As David Loy notes in *The World is Made of Stories*: “The world is made of our accounts of it because we never grasp the work as it is in itself, apart from our stories about it. We do not experience a world and then make up stories to understand it. Whenever we try to peel them all away, to discover the reality behind, whatever becomes exposed immediately transforms into story, like excavated artifacts that disintegrate as soon as uncovered” (2010, p. 4).

Undoing the “master narrative”, the reifications of the fixed, the linear, the real, the hierarchical, and the patriarchal, find their place once again in the storied, the mutable, the multiple, and the possible. Leaving the known and entering into the space of inquiry and unknowing opens space for a radical reseeing and restorying. Again, as Loy notes: “Like the proverbial fish that cannot see the water they swim in, we do not see the medium we dwell within. Unaware that our stories are stories, we experience them as the world. But we can change the water. When our accounts of the world become different, the world becomes different” (Loy 2010, p. 5).

What is the difference readers are left with at the end of *Dear Departed*? More precisely, how can the dismantling of self through this Buddhist lens inform our way of seeing the world? As Rémo is quoted in Yourcenar’s narrative reembodyment of Octave: “I see so clearly what tiny specks we form on the globe! I understand so well what nonentities we are in the context of the centuries! I am engulfed by my nothingness” (1991, p. 180). The first major effect is that of perspective: our sense of self and our stories are not the center nor the pinnacle of other stories and histories, but a simple link in the great chain of being, a brief intersection of causes and conditions that will rise and fall away, as do all others. Again, as Rémo (through Octave/Yourcenar) writes: “I was no more than a living thought”, he said, evoking his own brief past. “It seemed to me I was a traveler ascending a mountain. When I turned around, I saw the vast sea of tears that had been wept by so many unfortunates who no longer exist” (1991, p. 157).

This empathically experienced understanding of the insubstantiality and impermanence of self is the first pillar of Buddhism, wisdom, which leads to the second pillar, compassion. No one is, or is able to be, alone in brief travels through existence: “Between the young man of 1864 and his eventual grand-niece, who will herself wander through this part of the world around 1930, thousands of pilgrims have passed by these same sites; others, crowds of them, have come there since” (Yourcenar 1991, p. 234). In not being a separate and essential self, one *is*, in effect, all others as well. Praying for others “is nearly the same thing as praying for oneself” (Yourcenar 1991, p. 123). In failing at her autobiographical and genealogical project, Yourcenar succeeds in the spiritual exercise of not finding, but being, her original face:

But it goes without saying that I did not find the common denominators I sought between these people and me. The similarities I thought I discovered here and there unravel as soon as I try to define them precisely, ceasing to be anything other than likenesses, such as those that link all creatures that have existed. [...] What survives, as always, is the infinite pity for the little that we are and, contradictorily, respect and curiosity for these fragile and complex structures, poised as if on pilings at the brink of the abyss, and no two of which are exactly alike. (1991, pp. 136–37)

This pity is clearly not a form of “poor me” or even a “poor us” and a sad protest against fate or destiny. Rather it is a recognition of the nature of existence and the suffering it entails: “far from according with a sentimental conception of life, this pity, raised to a white heat, inflicts its knifelike pain only on those who, strong or not, brave or not, intelligent or not (such qualities are beside the point), have been granted the horrible gift of looking at the world full in the face and seeing it as it is” (Yourcenar 1991, p. 205). As Rémo affirms, echoing the vow of the bodhisattva to save all beings from suffering: “Our souls are sufficiently vast to encompass the world of all unfortunates, black and white; our minds are sufficiently keen to find ways of bringing them aid” (Yourcenar 1991, p. 161). And as Yourcenar adds: “This capacity to suffer for others, and, thus, to include in the category of one’s fellow creatures not only man but the immense multitude of all living things, is sufficiently rare to be noted with respect” (1991, p. 207).

Looking for an original face before birth, finding the infinite net of interconnected existence and experience, frees the present from the past and all projected futures. The original questions of “Who am I?” “Where do I come from?” and “What is my place in the world?” posed by genealogical research are the very questions at the heart of all Zen practice. Yourcenar’s genealogical memoir works to move readers from a sense of a separate phenomenal self to empathically experience our profound inter-mutuality and its resultant compassion for all beings. In the final image of *Dear Departed*, Yourcenar leaves readers contemplating the image of her pregnant mother at rest, gazing into a horizon at the distant line beyond the plains where sea and sky meet. Pausing in that particular moment at the intersection of the infinities of space and time, Yourcenar invites readers to enter into beginner’s mind with one final question: What now? Just this.

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